

The outbreak of polio in Syria is an indictment of the civilised world

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By Ahmed Rashid.

Polio has returned to the [Middle East](#) in a devastating form as a result of war, terrorism, a collapse of services and a refugee crisis right across the region. Moreover, the strain that is already infecting Syrian children has probably arisen from Pakistan, which is witnessing the same symptoms of war and refugees.

At least 10 children have [tested positive for polio](#) in Syria's eastern Deir ez-Zour province with another 12 suffering from paralysis symptoms, according to the World Health Organisation, which fears a major regional outbreak of the disease is already under way due to the collapse of health services, not just in [Syria](#) but also in neighbouring Iraq and even parts of Lebanon and Jordan where local health facilities are overwhelmed by refugees.

It is a frightening indictment of the civilised world's [utter failure at peacemaking in Syria](#) that a disease the WHO and organisations such as the Bill Gates Foundation have, in a global campaign, been so close to eliminating has returned with a vengeance.

Young lives are being devastated in the indefinite agony of war. "It's the perfect storm into which to drop the polio virus. This isn't a Syrian problem. This is a Middle Eastern problem," says Bruce Aylward, assistant director-general for polio at the WHO. He thinks that the confirmed cases so far are just "the tip of the iceberg".

Polio is an infectious disease that causes paralysis especially among children under five. There is no known cure but vaccination has provided enormous worldwide success rates after a 25 year-long campaign. In recent times, polio was only prevalent in [Pakistan](#), Afghanistan and Nigeria - until now.

The WHO has said the Pakistani strain of polio has been discovered in sewage in Egypt, Israel and the West Bank and Gaza, and it may have spread to Syria by Pakistani militants who have arrived there to fight the regime of [President Bashar al-Assad](#).

The Pakistani Taliban have refused to allow polio vaccination to be carried out in the northwestern areas they control along the Afghan border, although the Afghan Taliban does allow vaccination. 37 cases of polio have, as a consequence, been reported in northwestern Pakistan this year and around 30 nurses, doctors, security guards and police officers carrying out vaccinations have been killed in the past twelve months.

The government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the army have been adamant about the US ending its drone campaign in the region and have even appealed to the Taliban to hold peace talks, but the government has failed to deliver a strategy or a strong enough message to the Taliban to allow a vaccination campaign to be carried out.

It is a chronic case of misguided priorities by the highest office-holders in the country, yet that lack of commitment to the population is now being repeated in the Middle East and the west where a potential polio epidemic in Syria is at the bottom of politicians' priorities.

The WHO has now launched an emergency campaign to vaccinate 20 million children in the next two months - a hugely ambitious program given the war, violence and the large scale movement of refugees taking place across the region. Before the two-and-a-half-year long civil war began, Syria had one of the most advanced medical systems in the Arab world. Now it barely has first aid stations due to the destruction of hospitals, the flight of doctors and the collapse of services such as clean drinking water, electricity and garbage collection. The cases confirmed in Syria are the first in 14 years.

Valerie Amos, the top relief official at the UN, told the Security Council last week that combatants on both sides had ignored the council's appeal to give humanitarian workers access to all areas. "What we are seeing is a deepening of the crisis," she said.

But this raises a larger question. If the UN Security Council is not able to put to rest its squabbles and stand-off over Syria, and if China and Russia are not able to agree with the west on a common strategy to fight a potential polio epidemic, then how on earth can we expect a peace conference by the end of the year or anything even approaching an end to the conflict?

Moreover, the Muslim world has barely registered the polio crisis. Saudi Arabia has taken plenty of air time to express its anger at the US and why it has [refused to take its seat on the UN Security Council](#), as well as spending a lot of money backing the Syrian rebels, but has it said a word about the polio crisis? That is as true of the other Gulf states and the wider Muslim world.

Here is a perfect task for the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which musters together 56 Muslim countries: to bring the polio crisis and the cause of children to the top of the agenda for Muslim countries. Yet we have not heard a peep from the OIC.

As we have seen in previous civil wars in [Afghanistan](#), Lebanon and elsewhere, they cause enormous human suffering. But now the interconnectedness of the world allows the chaos of one country to infect the entire world. Surely the lives of children and averting a polio epidemic is a cause that should unite the world rather than divide it, or worse still, be ignored by the world's leaders.